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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 008286

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT SPEAKER ON ISLAMISTS, NEW GOVERNMENT,
AND AGENDA FOR REGULAR SESSION

REF: A. AMMAN 8225

[1](#)B. AMMAN 8196

[1](#)C. AMMAN 7909

Classified By: Amb. Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (b) (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Lower House Speaker Abdul Hadi Al-Majali predicted to the Ambassador that "a good majority" would vote to approve the government of Prime Minister Fayez and pledged to cooperate with the government to implement King Abdullah's calls for political development. He denied public allegations that he made concessions to Islamists to gain their support for Speaker and said that engaging with moderates within the Islamic Action Front (IAF) would marginalize its more extreme elements. Majali espoused plans to amend parliamentary by-laws to limit debate and speed up passage of pending provisional laws. He remained wary, however, of proposals to raise taxes or increase prices of subsidized commodities. End Summary.

"MODERATE" ISLAMISTS

[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador and PolOff met the newly elected Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament, Abdul Hadi Al-Majali, December 16 to congratulate him on his position and to inquire about the regular session of Parliament (which commenced December 1). Majali almost immediately told the Ambassador that reports alleging he had made a concessionary deal with the Islamists to gain their backing for Speaker (see refs a, b) were "all untrue." Majali stated that while he had reached an agreement with the IAF, this understanding related to administrative issues and general principles on the role of Parliament, not controversial political topics.

[1](#)3. (C) Majali defended his rapport with the IAF, asserting that by engaging with the group's moderate members, he was empowering them at the expense of more extremist elements. Majali asserted that 13-14 of Islamist MPs were well-educated and reasonable, including prominent IAF MP Azzam Al-Hnaidi (West Banker, Amman - 2nd District) who he deemed "a decent guy." "If we try to include them, they will cooperate," said Majali. IAF "old school" hard-liners such as Mohammed Abu Fares (West Banker, Amman - 5th District) were not representative of the current Islamic bloc, Majali opined, and had limited influence. Majali concluded that he was "not worried" about the IAF and that he would not allow them to get too far out of line. "I'll let them talk, but when the time for voting comes, they will get nothing," he stated, referring to IAF attempts to push forward their more radical agenda items. (COMMENT: The New York Times quoted "moderate" IAF MP Hnaidi after Saddam's capture as saying "Saddam was a symbol of defiance to the U.S. plans in the region. And we support any person who stands in the face of American dominance" - see ref c. END COMMENT.)

PRAISE FOR THE PRIME MINISTER

[1](#)4. (C) Asked about the new government, Majali praised Prime Minister Faisal Al-Fayez as a "good man" who was "well-liked and honest." He said that Fayez had "changed the atmosphere" of Jordanian politics through his expansive dialogue efforts, especially with those who opposed the previous government. Majali hoped that Fayez would continue such dialogue as this would aid in implementing King Abdullah's priorities for the country.

[1](#)5. (C) Majali said that the Lower House would start debate on a vote of confidence in Fayez's government on December 19, which Majali hoped to wrap up by the end of Monday evening, December 22. (NOTE: Post considers this as too optimistic an assessment, given that 109 of the 110 MPs spoke during nearly two weeks of debate leading up to the vote of confidence in former PM Abul Ragheb's government last summer. END NOTE.) He predicted that "a good majority" of MPs would support Fayez at the end of the debate. Majali cautioned, however, that while Fayez enjoyed wide approval amongst MPs at this

time, "we will judge him on how he implements his promises."

A NEW WAY OF DOING BUSINESS

16. (C) Majali admitted that it would be very difficult for Parliament to take action on the large backlog of provisional laws, promulgated during Parliament's long absence, during the regular session under current by-laws. Accordingly, he is seeking to gain majority support in the Lower House to change the by-laws so that all proposed amendments/changes to provisional laws must first be submitted in writing to the appropriate reviewing committee before they can be debated openly in the regular session. If such amendments are not first submitted to the committee, then they will not be allowed for discussion on the Lower House floor. Majali opined that this by-law change would cut the time needed to address the provisional laws "in half."

17. (C) Majali further contended that many of the temporary laws were very short and non-controversial, and thus could be approved quite readily. He was in discussions with the government over which provisional laws to move on first, and also expected to meet with King Abdullah and Queen Rania regarding Parliament's legislative agenda. Majali had already talked with the Queen about ensuring approval of laws affecting women's rights.

18. (C) To strengthen Parliament, Majali proposed bringing in independent experts to advise the 14 standing committees. He had recently secured the services of ex-Central Bank officials, for example, to provide advice for the Financial Committee. Majali boasted of gains in efforts to computerize operations in Parliament and said that MPs are being given training on computer use, the Internet, and even how to type. Some MPs are now bringing laptops to the Lower House chamber during session, although cell phone use is prohibited (with compliance ensured by signal jamming equipment). Majali also requested USG-funded "study visits" by MPs to the United States.

SUPPORT FOR POLITICAL REFORM

19. (C) Majali was fully on board with the King's call for political reforms, saying that "We can be the best model in the Arab world." He strongly agreed on the need for genuine political parties, although he cautioned that these should be based on programs and specific platforms, rather than just ideology. Majali contended that roughly 80% of politicians and activists in Jordan were "centrists" or "nationalists," while only 20 percent were part of the opposition (e.g., Islamists, Communists, etc.). However, Majali lamented that this 80 percent was woefully unorganized in comparison to the opposition, which gave the opposition more power than their numbers warranted.

110. (C) Majali admitted that previous government calls for political development went mostly unheeded, but opined that "this time will be different." The fact that the King had come out so strongly and publicly meant that this was now a true priority. "The King's credibility may be damaged if we don't move," Majali stated. He planned to have weekly meetings with the chairmen of all parliamentary blocs to coordinate agendas and help push through the King's political reforms.

MONEY MATTERS

111. (C) When asked about the government budget, Majali said it would be sent to the newly-selected Finance Committee shortly and then discussed in the Lower House about three weeks later. He hoped that each bloc would select only one or two people to debate the budget on the chamber floor, but conceded that this might not be possible.

112. (C) While Majali didn't summarily reject tax increases, he said that the current system of tax collection was "very bad" and the focus should first be on improving this system, rather than raising taxes. Majali was also wary of possible price hikes on subsidized commodities. He contended that several ministries were wasting money and that government expenses could be brought down through various reforms. Per capita spending on health care, he claimed, was higher than in Japan and could be reduced by combining the different hospital systems into one administration to provide centralized purchasing, training, etc. Nevertheless, he concluded, "If the government convinces us that its money is being well spent, then we will support its requests."

COMMENT

13. (C) Majali was confident and forward-looking throughout the meeting. However, some of his planned parliamentary reforms -- especially quick confidence and budget votes, streamlining discussion of amendments, and enhancing the role of committees -- will meet opposition from MPs who may feel excluded. With 109 other MPs to contend with, we doubt that Majali's efforts to reform Parliament will come to pass quite as he described them.

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